



Fostering networking behavior, career planning and optimism, and subjective career success: An intervention study



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ABSTRACT

The present study evaluated personal resource-oriented interventions supporting the career development of young academics, working at German universities within the STEM fields. The study sought to foster subjective career success by improving networking behavior, career planning, and career optimism. The study involved a quasi-experimental pre-post intervention with two intervention and two control groups ($N = 81$ research associates). Participants of the first intervention group received networking training; participants of the second intervention group received the same networking training plus individual career coaching. Participants of both intervention groups were female. Participants of the control groups (i.e., male vs. female group) did not participate in any intervention. As expected, path analyses, based on mean differences from pre-test to post-test, revealed an increase in career planning and career optimism within the networking plus career coaching intervention group, that was indirectly positively related to changes in subjective career success. Contrary to our expectations, the networking group training alone and in combination with the career coaching showed no effectiveness in fostering networking behavior. Results are discussed in the context of career counseling and intervention effectiveness studies.

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1. Introduction

In times of highly transitive careers, knowledge about factors supporting a successful career development is crucial. Employability and adaptive individual resources turn out to be vital key elements/resources for career success (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). However, there is little research on how employability and adaptive psychological resources can be developed. It could for instance be achieved by means of specific career interventions such as training (e.g., Raabe, Frese, & Beehr, 2007; Vuori, Toppinen-Tanner, & Mutanen, 2012), or more generally by career counseling (Savickas, 2012).

Career or vocational counseling has proven to be effective (e.g., Bernes, Bardick, & Orr, 2007; Whiston, Brecheisen, & Stephens, 2003). However, Bernes et al. identified some shortcomings in previous career counseling research. The majority of intervention studies did not apply an experimental design with control groups. Moreover, most of them were conducted before 1985, and with careers changing, it is evident to conduct new studies with an experimental focus (for examples see Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2012; Vuori et al., 2012). Second, most studies did not apply longitudinal designs, and hence, questions about career change could not be answered comprehensively (see also Heppner & Heppner, 2003). Additionally, there exists a small set of frequently studied outcome variables such as seeking career information, decidedness in career decision-making, career maturity, or evaluation of the

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intervention itself (see also Guindon & Richmond, 2005). Furthermore, self-constructed items were frequently used instead of accepted, validated scales. Finally, most studies contained non-working participant samples. Only few studies analyzed career interventions with samples of working individuals (e.g., Raabe et al., 2007; Vuori et al., 2012).

To overcome some of these limitations, this study evaluated the effect of two career interventions (i.e., networking training and career coaching) on multiple important career outcome variables using a quasi-experimental pre-post intervention study. We decided to apply a networking training as *networking behavior* is important for building up the employability resource of social capital (e.g., Fugate et al., 2004; Wolff & Moser, 2009). Moreover, networking-related interventions have received minimal attention in past research (cf. Jokisaari & Vuori, 2011). The decision to add career coaching to the intervention design was driven by the fact that individualized in-depth counseling constitutes an important possibility of career support (Parker, Hall, & Kram, 2008; Savickas, 2012; Verbruggen & Sels, 2008). Furthermore, career coaching has the potential to boost the employability-related resources of human capital, such as *career planning* (Fugate et al., 2004; Gould, 1979), and adaptive psychological career resources, such as *career optimism* (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008; Rottinghaus, Day, & Borgen, 2005; Spurk & Volmer, 2013). In the following, we will refer to these variables as *personal career resources*, as they all help an individual to negotiate career hurdles, and hence, relate positively to career success (Ng & Feldman, 2014). Another aim of the study was to analyze whether potential changes in networking behavior, career planning, and career optimism subsequently and indirectly relate to changes in indicators of subjective career success (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2014).

2. Networking interventions foster networking behavior

Networking behavior can be seen as personal antecedent for building different career-related social networks (Wolff & Moser, 2009). Networking is a critical factor in career development, as it is positively related to several career-related variables such as performance, motivation, career goals, received mentoring, organizational mobility, salary, promotions, and career satisfaction (e.g., Wolff & Moser, 2009).

Interventions that focus on networking behavior as a personal resource for accumulating social capital have received little attention. However, networking behavior is conceptualized as a malleable, behavioral tendency that is affected by personal motivation to construct social networks (Wolff & Moser, 2009). Based on this background and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), networking behavior should be affected by an individual's intention to show such behavior.

Consequently, networking interventions that address attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control of networking behavior should result in more networking behavior. Furthermore, based on social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) clear role or behavioral models of how to conduct networking in concrete situations should foster networking behavior.

Jokisaari and Vuori (2011) evaluated the effect of a group-based intervention on career network ties among Finnish adolescents, aiming to increase preparedness for the educational transition faced by ninth graders. The intervention successfully used a social-cognitive approach to motivate participants to practice and seek a desirable career network, and apply effective career choice strategies. Six months after the intervention, results showed an increased number of school counselors within the participants' networks, indicating a greater preparedness for the educational transition. In sum, a networking intervention based on social-cognitive principles and the theory of planned behavior should increase networking behavior.

3. Career coaching fosters networking behavior, career planning and optimism

Career coaching is a special type of career counseling (Savickas, 2015) that involves a time-restricted, more or less non-directive interaction between a professional coach and a client (Chung & Gfroerer, 2003). According to Savickas (2015) career coaching typically (a) assesses the developmental status of clients in terms of current situation, goals, and competencies; (b) orients clients to opportunities, challenges, and barriers; and (c) develops the needed knowledge and skills. Among others, career coaching implies career identity building, strength and weakness analysis, analysis of career decisions and broader work-life issues. Social-cognitive learning, role/decision clarification, biographic-narrative techniques, and goal-setting processes represent major mechanisms explaining why career coaching is effective (Chung & Gfroerer, 2003).

Research on coaching interventions has focused on a small set of outcome variables, mainly related to the coach or coaching process. Among other variables, these were satisfaction with the coaching process and outcome, intentions for future coaching, subjective evaluations of coaching effectiveness, and ratings of goal attainment at the end of the coaching process (e.g., Parker et al., 2008). However, for career coaching it is essential to test the effectiveness with respect to broader outcomes like specific career resources and career success. Intervention effects could provide evidence for long-term career learning (Parker et al., 2008).

Empirically, Verbruggen and Sels (2008) showed that career counseling improved clients' self-awareness, adaptability, and career self-directedness. However, in this study, no control group was present. In the context of executive coaching, Kombarakaran, Yang, Baker, and Fernandes (2008) analyzed coaches that helped executives to reframe perspectives and encouraged the practice of new behaviors. Most executives agreed that the coaching outcomes were consistent with expectations and increased their confidence. Methodologically, this study relied on a single post-measure without a control group. In the context of peer coaching, Parker et al. (2008) analyzed the effects of relational processes on the career learning of MBA students. Six months after a peer-coaching course, participants were surveyed at a single point in time. Next to satisfaction with the peer coaching, qualitative analyses revealed that success in dealing with change, support for personal and professional goals, increased confidence, and improved accuracy on self-image were main benefits of the career-related peer coaching. In sum, these empirical findings strengthen the theoretical assumptions that career coaching should boost this study's personal career resources.

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